

***Les Femmes Nouvelles: The Liberating Image of French Women  
in Fin-de-Siècle Bicycle Advertisements***

**An Honors 499 Thesis**

**by**

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**Ball State University**

**Muncie, Indiana**

**May 2008**

**Graduation Date: May 2008**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ronald Rarick", followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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## Abstract

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During the *fin-de-siècle*, a period of political stability, rapid industrialization, and economic prosperity in France, a burgeoning middle class emerged in Paris. In the lively capital, Parisians enjoyed countless leisure activities, as the cultural center of Europe attracted a diverse population of artistic, literary, and philosophical minds from around the world. Traditional definitions of gender roles, however, limited the public activity of women to the domestic duty of shopping for their families. Large, colorful lithographic advertisements produced by artists were displayed amid the city streets, popularizing new consumer goods while simultaneously helping to elevate the medium of lithography to high art status. The safety bicycle was one of the most popular, and widely advertised, consumer products of the 1890s. In this paper, I examine the representation of women in five bicycle advertisements, as men were rarely depicted in them regardless of the bicycle frame often being a men's model. I heavily explore the social and political environment of France as I discuss the context and interpret the intended message of the advertisements, concluding that such images complemented feminist identities in French women, speaking to their interests of literally moving beyond the domestic realm.

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The civil disaster of the Paris Commune marked the start of the Third Republic, a new government that, according to its first president Adolphe Thiers, was the “regime that divided least” after the humiliating defeat the French suffered in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) (Moynahan 32). Finally, after a tumultuous century of great political instability and international and civil conflict, the French experienced a refreshing sense of national security, enjoyed increasing economic prosperity and a burgeoning middle class, and dabbled in social reform under the progressive Third Republic at the *fin-de-siècle* (Schardt 7). This confident, expansive spirit was most apparent in Paris, a city focused on innovation (Collins 41).

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, despite continuing political strife, Paris underwent significant change. Under Napoleon III, the urban planner Baron Haussmann transformed the narrow medieval streets into wider, grand boulevards that beckoned the social elite and commercial enterprises to make appearances (Tiersten 16). Rail systems were soon introduced, affordably transferring the lower classes from the countryside to work in the city, while simultaneously showcasing the growing city as a competitive economic force. Paris was also the site of several extravagant Expositions Universelles, which proved to the world that France was on the mend, demonstrating ceaseless industrial pursuit of technological innovation and confirming the status of Paris as the vivacious, cultural center of Europe (Moynahan 33).

A common leisure activity in this era was strolling down the grand promenades, particularly in the evening, and enjoying the countless activities found in the city—bustling cafés, lively cabarets, and packed dance halls. Famous entertainments, such as the Folies Bergère and Moulin Rouge, were immortalized through the large, energetic chromolithographic

posters made by artists such as Jules Chéret (1836-1932) and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901). These images of Parisian leisure merged avant-garde artistic ideas and transformed the streets themselves into a “picture gallery” (Gretton 115). Paris drew talented and curious people from around the world, and unless they staunchly objected to the decadent lifestyles made famous by the city, they could find community among the multiplicity of artistic, literary, and philosophical minds that flourished there (Moynahan 45).

However, the many pursuits of the city were mainly reserved for young, privileged men and the women they accompanied. Though society was more progressive than under earlier, chiefly aristocratic or monarchical rule, the ideals of the Third Republic continued to emphasize the differences between the sexes. The majority of people held onto the concept of “separate spheres” for men and women, which sought primarily to keep women in domestic environs (Silverman 73). The advent of the department store brought about the most “accessible social arena” for women in public life and legitimized the public appearance of women because it allowed them to fulfill their domestic duty of shopping for the home, a task inextricably tied to nurturing the Republican family (Gretton 113; Tiersten 23).

Though the *fin-de-siècle* tendency of consumerism itself gave women public visibility, one of the products being sold allowed them, as well as people of all ages and classes, the ability to take to the streets as never before. By the late 1880s, the mid-century invention known as the *vélocipède* had been refined into the more comfortable, affordable safety bicycle (Herlihy 278). From its debut, people were drawn to the bicycle as a curious machine, an exciting means for

transport, exercise, and leisure. By 1900, there was one bicycle for every 32 people in France (Foley 159).

The bicycle had great impact on French society as a technical innovation, but for women, the bicycle was one of the most transformative inventions of the century because it gave them unprecedented mobility and thereby a sense of liberation from male supervision. The nature of the bicycle itself excited debate over women's health, sexuality, public appearance, and changing familial and societal roles. Despite the controversy, women continued to ride. To the social conservatives of the era, as well as women eager for liberation, the bicycle was closely tied to the *femme nouvelle*, a "new woman" who had social and economic aspirations beyond the *foyer* (Foley 157).

In this essay, the social and commercial environment of the 1890s will be considered with particular interest in the controversial, though liberating, effect of the safety bicycle on the lives of French women. A selection of bicycle advertisements featuring female figures will be examined, noting the representation of women and connections to the advance of the *femme nouvelle*. As a commercial product of great interest to both sexes, advertisements of the bicycle were intended for a wide audience, though it can be seen that even images intended for men communicated ideas of liberation to women. In addition, the array of artistic styles of Paris at the end of the century will be discussed as a necessity because chromolithographic prints were considered an integral part of popular culture and were often collected by the public.

## Ushering in the “Golden Age”

In the chromolithographic poster *l'Etendard Français* (1891) [Fig. 1], the revered French poster artist Jules Chéret (1836-1932) promotes the bicycles and tricycles available at the Ateliers de Constructions Mécaniques of Paris by featuring his archetypal *femme de Paris* elegantly seated upon a bicycle. Wearing a stylish blue, white, and red wasp-waisted dress, she is herself the tri-color as she carries a flag, exuding confidence with good posture and a slightly lifted chin. Chéret is selling the “French Standard” bicycle in his characteristic, wildly successful way; the bicycle appears to be an afterthought when compared to the strong presence of a vivacious, colorfully rendered woman upon it.

By the 1890s, Chéret had been a well-known and prolific poster artist for nearly 30 years, applying his mastery of the lithographic medium and innovative spirit to designing large scale, eye-catching advertisements for the diverse, emerging industries of Paris (Abdy 9). Chéret illustrated a wide variety of products, from medicinal throat lozenges to alcoholic beverages, being used by stylish, buoyant people who dominated a brightly colored, painterly field (Schardt 20). His skill lay not only of creating an alluring vision of *fin-de-siècle* life, but also in knowing how to capture and hold the gaze of *flâneurs*, the public that strolled through the city for leisure, through simplified imagery and dazzling handling of color (Gretton 115). Through his career in designing over 1,200 images, Chéret was not only responsible for “rediscovering” the function and potential of the lithographic medium, but fully realizing it in terms of commercial use and as a legitimate art form (Schardt 19).

After Chéret's celebrated application of "high" art to industrial and commercial printing, countless designers followed suit and became commercial artists as a way to earn a living (Abdy 9). The tumultuous century had culminated with a tendency to fusion; antiquity, Rococo, Japanese woodblock prints, and medieval illuminations were all sources of illustrative style. Cross-cultural influences and art historical references are evident in the work of two of the most successful poster designers working in Paris, Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939) and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901). The popularity of such artists and their print work, along with Chéret, was responsible for confirming the 1890s as a "golden era" of illustration (Arwas 7).

Because of the designers' deft abilities in making an eye-catching and breathtaking image, the public fell in love not only with the new consumer goods depicted in a poster, but often the poster as an object. It was not uncommon for freshly pasted posters to be removed by the passers-by who desired to decorate their homes with the work. There was also a surge in popularity of fine art prints amongst the public, as amateurs avidly collected affordable etchings and lithographs (Abdy 21). According to Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), the poster work of Chéret and his contemporaries was a "welcomed change" as it rejected the tired, "pompous" academic art of the prior era (Abdy 22). For the first time, an "intimate relationship" existed between art and life for the average person (Schardt 16).

### **The Emergence of the *Flâneuses***

The *flâneurs* of the urban environs played an essential role in popularizing the poster art of the era—but who exactly were these dawdling pleasure-seekers and what was their relationship to the ever-present commercial poster image?



In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Paris provided its growing population with numerous leisure activities: athletic pursuits in public parks, such as the popular Bois de Boulogne, shopping one's way up and down the newly-revamped, "opulent" boulevards in the heart of the city, or indulging in the seamier side of life through attending one of the nightly revues or dance halls (Silverman 16). For middle and upper class men, the streets of Paris were avenues of endless entertainments along which they could amuse themselves for hours while running errands; strolling soon became an activity itself (Gretton 114). Until the near end of the century, however, most of these outdoor or public activities were not socially acceptable or permitted for an unaccompanied woman or even a small group of women. Women were seen chiefly as responsible for maintaining the *foyer* and carefully raising children to be instilled with Republican values (Foley 131). In other words, the prevailing attitude of the Third Republic at its inception was that a woman was limited to the "private sphere," best complementing her husband and strengthening her country by assuming domestic roles that accentuated her femininity.

The social and political system that essentially barred unaccompanied women from public leisure activity also sought, as a means to retain sexual polarity, to keep them out of state institutions, such as education (Tiersten 23). Before the 1880s, secondary schooling did not exist for all women; only the privileged were able to receive education beyond the state-sponsored primary school system that had been established thirty years prior (Foley 130). Even then, a woman's "higher" education was often limited to preparatory courses on how to maintain a proper household and marriage, as well as child rearing (Silverman 66). By the turn of the

century, the new access women had to secondary education began to bring them steadily into the work place, beyond the factory. The majority, however, remained limited to the private, domestic “sphere” which was separate from that of the rational, well-defined male (Foley 136).

The attitude of men and women being of separate spheres was not only based on long-standing social conventions, but also was most pertinently advocated by the scientific community, which saw its research as a confirmation. Increasingly, anthropometric studies and medical studies of the human body’s processes served as confirmation of male superiority via Darwinist theory (Foley 135). One example of the interest in translating biological sexual differences into the social realm was the view that gender was considered embedded in nature, as ovaries were understood to be “passive” compared to the “active” male sperm (Foley 135). The leaders of the Republic felt that observing the greater implications of such biological differences was necessary to keeping social order (Silverman 73). This was taken literally to the extent that any threats to sexual polarity, such as the *femme nouvelle* and the liberating nature of the bicycle, were perceived to lead to “impotence, sterility, and race suicide” by political leaders of the era (Foley 135).

Women had more freedoms in Paris than in the country, partially due to the presence of factories and their growing female workforce. It was the city’s commercial growth and large, luxurious department stores, however, that brought about the presence of unaccompanied women in the male dominated public sphere. Grand department stores appeared in the 1860s, shortly after Baron Haussmann transformed the narrow city streets into magnificent boulevards (Tiersten 22). Men, and the woman they accompanied, had been casually promenading on the boulevards

as a social activity, but the department store quickly became solely the woman's promenade, as consumerism was associated with the interests of women or essentially female responsibilities (Gretton 114; Foley 156).

A woman's domain was the household, a private, interior space in which her family was comforted by her moralistic behavior and attentiveness. She was responsible not only for keeping the space clean and orderly, but also for embellishing it with goods and decor that reflected her careful, "natural" aesthetic sensibilities (Tiersten 23). As mass production made available an array of cheap consumer goods, the middle and upper classes were increasingly driven towards ownership. Since a woman maintained the home, the purchase of commodities became, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a seamless extension of her domestic identity (Foley 157).

The spacious department store, which was quickly becoming a fixture of Paris' commercial districts, initially attracted women because it catered to their domestic needs. Offering a wide range of goods in one location, the department store provided unprecedented convenience to the point of being called "a city within itself" (Gretton 114). The one-stop nature of these stores encouraged the idea that women could shop alone because it minimized their contact with the "brutishness of the streets" (Tiersten 23). In this sense, the department store took into consideration the anxiety that men (and the Republic in general) felt about women moving about the public sphere without supervision.

Inside this commercial setting, however, women were able to "circulate freely" in a controlled, interior environment that welcomed their presence with stock that appealed to their

delicate tastes (Gretton 114). It quickly became common for groups of bourgeois women to enter a department store as a social activity, with the intention of spending their entire day actively shopping or looking around at wares (Tiersten 17). Advertisements portraying content family life and other domestic activities covered the product displays, barraging the unrestrained female shopper with the idea that consumption was her duty (Foley 157). While feminine advertisements reaffirmed Republican values, images of women delighting in urban contexts, appeared ever more. Such images emboldened a woman's decision to continue venturing into the city, as they could see that their new identity was being recognized, however, these images were still through a "less threatening," entirely commercial context (Gretton 117).

By the mid-1880s, unaccompanied women were more visible on the trains and along the streets of Paris than ever before, largely because of the development of "commercial zones," or shopping districts, surrounding popular stores (Tiersten 22). The growth of consumer culture prompted women to explore a variety of competing commercial outlets on their way to the grand department stores. The activity of shopping had become the most acceptable public activity for women and *flânerie*, or strolling for leisure, became a progressively common diversion for women.

As middle class women were beginning to enjoy their afternoons as urban *flâneuses*, the introduction of a physically and socially liberating product brought them back to the storefront. When the *vélocipède* was unveiled in the late 1860s, only wealthy men and their wives had access to the vehicle. By the early 1890s, the mass produced safety bicycle was first affordably introduced to the middle and lower classes, quickly becoming one of the most popular consumer

goods of the era (Herlihy 278). Controversially, women took to the bicycle as never before, challenging complex social conventions as they rode away from the home, into the city and countryside, and out from under male supervision. For women, the bicycle was not only an exciting mode of transportation, but was also a form of liberation.

### **The Democratic New Vehicle of the Republic**

“This horse of wood and iron fills a void in modern life;

it responds not only to our needs but also our aspirations.”

—*Le Monde Illustré*, Spring 1869 (Herlihy 127).

In his poster *Cycles Clément* (1898) [Fig. 2], Jean de Paléologue (1860-1942), known as “Pal,” delivers a message of French technological victory. A female figure dominates the image, donning a gauzy dress and winged sandals (an attribute of Mercury), leaping forward as she hovers above Paris along the Seine. Her left arm is extended forward, proudly displaying the Clément safety bicycle in front of her body. Her right hand is raised triumphantly in the air as she grasps a laurel wreath, symbolic of victory. Just below and to the right of the laurel wreath, a stylized hat in the form of *le coq de gaulois*, a French cultural emblem, sits upon her head. Confident in her posture as she springs towards the viewer, the woman is an allegory of French progress, prideful in celebrating the refinement of the safety bicycle within the city of its invention.

Pierre Michaux of Paris had finally realized the age-old dream of human powered transport in the spring of 1867, after several Frenchmen struggled for decades with awkward, cumbersome vehicles, such as the *draisine*, which were no more than wheeled “walking aides”

(Herlihy 75). Michaux's *vélocipède*, a chainless two-wheeler with pedals attached directly to the front hub, found immediate success in Paris. However, the high cost of ownership limited its early clientele to upper class men. Passionate about the potential of the new vehicle as a common mode of transportation and exciting sport, these men often rode in groups down the city streets to show off the ease of use and speed of the bicycle (Herlihy 78). By the end of 1868, the public was broadly aware of the *vélo* and intrigued by the novel opportunities it offered; the French fascination with the bicycle had officially begun.

Although costing over three months of salary to the middle class worker upon its introduction, the *vélo* was an alluring machine to people of all classes and of either gender, both on practical and philosophical levels (Bouffard 9). For one, the *vélo* did not require any special skill to use, though one was wise to take advantage of the free riding lessons offered by many of its manufacturers (Herlihy 81). Though initially expensive, in the long run it was cheaper than maintaining a horse or continually paying for other transport. The *vélocipède* was appreciated as a fast mode of transportation to get to work that also came with the benefit of exercise. The average cyclist was capable of traveling at eight miles per hour and could ride several miles "with the exertion of walking one" (Herlihy 75). It enabled workers to search beyond comfortable walking distances for better, higher paying jobs or different opportunities (Bouffard 11). Cycling was also enjoyed as a natural, relaxing experience that freed the worker from "mechanical restraints" of their jobs and fixed train schedules (Garvey 70).

The price came down as more manufacturers produced the *vélo*, but it was not in the hands of the average person until near the end of the century. The most basic models could cost

as much as two weeks' salary for a teacher; the most personalized and luxurious bicycles could cost up to three months' pay (Bouffard 9). The early pricing competition did, however, begin to alleviate the only obstacle to ownership, as social status or gender themselves did not decide who could ride.

Though only a small number of women took to the *vélo* because of its cost, women were greatly interested in the vehicle as a form of leisure, exercise, and independence. From the start, they were aware that this revolutionary form of transportation could also help push for much needed social reform (Herlihy 3). Society was quick to view and criticize early female cyclists as scandalous, daring, and downright "outré," for participating in a masculine activity in the public arena (Wosk 92). Sport activities had long fostered community among men, allowing them to develop strength, confidence, and exercise in arenas off limits to women (Foley 160). Despite the debate over the aggressive nature of the sport of cycling, women's *vélo* races were organized shortly after the introduction of the vehicle. Though few in number compared to men's races, they were popular events (Herlihy 100).

One notable race took place in Bordeaux in November 1868, drawing thousands of curious spectators (Herlihy 135). Daringly, these women shortened their skirts, or even controversially, wore pants, though mainly out of necessity; the *vélo* was difficult for women to ride without getting their long, draping skirts caught on the pedal, or even more dangerous, in the spokes. Female and male spectators supported such races because the women were adept cyclists, comparable to men. The riders were viewed as celebrities, championed for their reputations as fierce competitors (Herlihy 136). Women were especially inspired by the show,

viewing the competitive, exciting races as signals of social progress (Wosk 92). Any foray into the public sphere, whether shopping in the city or riding a bike, was embraced as an opportunity for change from the monotonous, “cramped and contracted” life women had been unnaturally living indoors (Wosk 99).

The majority of the public, particularly in the countryside where races took place, was not ready for “real” women to ride just yet. Satirists often portrayed them as *amazones* who tore through the streets on their vélos, abandoning their husbands and children (Foley 160). The images were of thick, masculine women with “obscenely” exposed legs. Another common image of early women cyclists played off of the stereotype that women could not understand machines and involved bumbling women in stylish dress awkwardly sitting upon their vélos, barely able to control the sophisticated vehicles (Wosk 95). Both examples exposed society’s anxiety about the unabashedly liberating nature of the bicycle, as it was fast, easy to use transport that could carry a woman into the city, countryside, or wherever she chose to go, alone and unsupervised (Garvey 69). Since women did not need the assistance or company of men in order to ride a bicycle, female cyclists were perceived as challenging natural gender roles and threatening the breakdown of social order (Foley 135).

Leaders of the Republic who clung to the idea of separate spheres that kept women in the *foyer*, again used biological science to argue against women’s use of the bicycle, stating that a woman’s “natural fragility and modesty” were reasons they should avoid riding (Foley 159). Public controversy about women’s issues, particularly sexuality, quickly developed. These major social concerns, however, could not stop the mass production of the safety bicycle in the 1890s,



and were only heightened as the new bicycle was rigorously marketed to and purchased by eager women.

The safety bicycle was an improved version of the *vélocipède* that had pedals attached to a chain, enclosed gears, and a coaster brake (Wosk 97). In 1891, Édouard Michelin (1859-1940) and his brother André (1853-1931), owners of a rubber factory, patented tires with removable inner tubes (Bouffard 15). Formerly, the vélo had solid, one-inch thick tires that were glued directly to the rims. The safety bicycle used Michelin's pneumatic tires, soon produced by several manufacturers, which provided a faster, more comfortable ride and reduced rolling weight dramatically (Bouffard 16).

The greatest appeal for women, however, was the introduction of a drop frame "feminine" model that debuted alongside the men's diamond frame safety bicycle (Garvey 69). Instead of extending from the handle bars to just under the seat, the crossbar on the women's frame swept down low near the pedals, allowing long skirts to drape slightly more comfortably and retain the rider's modesty (Wosk 97). Bicycle manufacturers had witnessed the growing trend of female cyclists in the years since the invention of the *vélocipède*, and though women had been determined to own a bicycle regardless of a feminine option, the innovation confirmed in women's minds that cycling was an appropriate leisure activity in which they felt welcome to participate.

In 1893, a few years after the more accessible safety bicycle became popular, there were over 130,000 of them in Paris; five years later there were one half million (Bouffard 9). The extraordinary popularity of the bicycle was largely due to its new affordability, functionality, and

enthusiastic riders, but as a product that debuted during the “golden age” of illustration in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, one cannot discount the effect of its colorful advertisements.

### **The Safety Bicycle and *les femmes de Paris***

Like other competitive manufacturers of Paris’ famous products, such as cosmetics, clothing lines, fashionable accessories, and cigarettes, operators of bicycle shops established their brand name and increased sales by plastering the streets with large chromolithographic advertisements. All advertisements that were pasted along the city streets served a specific purpose—to catch the gaze of the passers-by and sell them a new vision of themselves, bettered by a product. Regardless of an artist’s stylistic influences and individualized handling of color or line, the human figure, typically female, was always predominant in the field of posters in this period (Schardt 16).

In the case of the bicycle, a product that was purchased and used by both sexes, the representation of the female figure was different from poster to poster. In general, there were two tendencies. To capture the interest of women, especially aspiring *femmes nouvelles*, fashionably (and more rationally) dressed modern women were portrayed assertively cycling alone, often in the city. The male gaze was caught with alluring, scantily clad female allegorical figures that promoted the industrious, more “masculine” qualities of the bicycle. Both sexes, however, were likely to find appealing aspects of the posters, as they celebrated one of the most wildly popular consumer products of the period.

In Lucien Baylac’s (1851-1913) *Cycles de la “Métropole”* (1893) [Fig. 3], a *femme de Paris* expressing the same buoyant spirit as the cyclist in Chéret’s *l’Etendard Français* [Fig. 1] is

centered, riding a safety bicycle. She wears a stylish green dress with puffy shoulders and a long skirt with ruffled hem, tied at the waist with a yellow sash that matches her stockings. Upon her head is a large tan hat adorned with feathers and a few flowers. A few locks of her dark hair are hanging loose, blown back as she pedals forward on her bicycle. The bicycle, a women's safety model with pneumatic tires, is in motion, as described by Baylac's vague rendering of the spokes and the skirt of her dress and sash fluttering behind her. She smiles radiantly, glancing off to the side as if communicating with a person on the street. Her left arm is raised into the air with her hand gesturing what is likely a friendly greeting to someone with whom she has made eye contact. The backdrop is a painterly scene in pure red and blue, not indicating her environs, though the shop being advertised is named "Metropolis Cycles," suggesting an urban locale.

Unlike the posters of Chéret [Fig. 1] and Pal [Fig. 2], Baylac's image intentionally communicates to a female viewer. In Chéret's poster, his *femme* is dressed in contemporary style but she is an allegory for the nation, a modern Marianne, with a tricolor dress, lapel pin, hat, and pennant in hand. Pal's female is a purely allegorical figure, celebrating the French achievement of the invention of the bicycle and progress of industry as she holds a men's frame bicycle. Traditionally, female personifications of ideals, such as liberty and virtue, are found throughout painting and sculpture. Women are handled in the same way through the lithographic medium, though the purposes of these works are different in that they are commercial.

Representations of female archetypes and goddesses were common in the Industrial Age as a way to impart "dignity, legitimacy, and stability" to the changing, mechanizing world that was exploring new technologies and altering traditional lifestyles (Wosk 17). These allegories,

though female, are not specifically selling bicycles to women or making commentary on the social status of women so much as they are following an artistic and philosophical tradition. Women would have understood the emblems and enjoyed viewing the posters amid the streets, but such advertisements did not have the same impact as images celebrating the “real,” modern woman.

In *Cycles de la “Métropole”* [Fig. 3] Baylac acquaints the viewer with a stylish woman riding a drop-frame safety bicycle. She is riding alone and with confidence, making eye contact and gesturing to someone as she rides. The bicycle being advertised is of the *métropole* and is being used by a vibrant *femme de Paris*, merging the interests of manufacturer with a liberating image greatly appealing to *flâneuses*. Unlike Chéret’s image, which was laden with Republican symbolism, Baylac’s woman is more closely a real-life *femme de Paris*, or at least glimpse of the independent, public identity that French women were striving to develop at the turn of the century.

Portraits of radiant, unaccompanied women in less restrictive clothing (like the model in Baylac’s poster [Fig. 3]) are commonly found in bicycle advertisements of the 1890s. Though it served the manufacturer’s purpose of selling more products, bicycle advertisements tapped into the contemporary debates about women’s social identity, promoting the bicycle as a mode of transport for the “new woman” (Gretton 119). The active, confident women depicted in these posters became icons of freedom and mobility, reflecting the desire that women had to enter the public sphere beyond the department store. Ideas of reshaping women’s social identities in a commercial context were much less threatening than efforts in the political arena, as debates for

and against maintaining traditional gender roles were particularly heated during the *fin-de-siècle* (Gretton 116).

The new cultural image of active women pursuing public lives, however, was not just an advertising phenomenon. Middle class women were coming to identify themselves as *femmes nouvelles*, women with aspirations and expectations beyond the *foyer*, and were entering educational institutions and professional careers as never before (Foley 157). Countless representations of the *femme nouvelle* in journals and publications from the 1890s pair her with a bicycle, which literally and figuratively liberated her from her traditional, interior lifestyle (Silverman 63). Though a relatively small number of women fully assumed this new career-oriented identity prior to World War I, the signs of change were becoming quite visible with the movement towards dress reform at the end of the century (Gretton 116).

### **The Controversial Call for Reform**

“More violent than any revolution [the bicycle] has entered customs,  
turned traditional opinions on their head, erased fearless resistances,  
and put pressure on old police ordinances on costume.”

--Georges Montorgueil (1857-1933), author (Gretton 119).

The first International Congress on Women's Rights was held at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, marking the “coming of age” of the feminist movement in France (Silverman 65). A small group of upper class women, mostly “society mothers,” met to discuss social goals that would elevate the status of women in France (Silverman 65). The Third Republic still sought to consign women to traditional roles, emphasizing the importance of the

family and its values as a way to maintain social order. Republican leaders already had anxiety because of the declining birth rate, and they felt threatened by the growing German population throughout the decade following the disastrous Franco-Prussian War (Silverman 66). Jules Simon (1814-1896), a former French statesman and influential philosopher, summarized the Republican view of the women's condition with the statement, "women, in body and character, are planned as preparation for child bearing" (Silverman 73). As women began to rally together for social reform, Republican leaders, doctors, and scholars sought rationales to defend traditional perspectives of gender, often seeking medical and biological proof of the "unsuitability" of women's participation in public activity (Foley 160; Silverman 70).

The women at this convention, however, understood that any threat to the Republican ideal of family, such as a rejection of the woman's role of childrearing and comforting her husband, would impede their cause (Foley 135). Their agenda focused on promoting egalitarian models of Republican families and promoting the idea of women as "independent individuals," capable of having identities beyond, but not neglecting, their familial obligations (Foley 148). Although the event was small, it was noted by the press and Republic officials as signaling the rise of a generation of women who were opposed to traditional gender roles (Silverman 65). Feminists in France took a subtle approach to reform, working within Republican mores and focusing on "superficial" changes, such as rational dress; women did not see suffrage as a priority, unlike women's liberation movements in other nations (Foley 148).

In Jean de Paléologue's *Fernand Clément & Cie.* (1894) [Fig. 4], a female model free-handedly and with bare feet, drives a men's frame safety bicycle across the backdrop of a large

yellow crescent moon and white shining stars. Her figure, loosely dressed in a windswept, diaphanous gown that flutters all around, is effortlessly poised upon the seat as she is literally “over the moon,” in a state of bliss. Her breasts are only half covered by the sheer dress as she leans backwards, tossing her head and hair to the side. With a cheerful smile on her face, she rests her head back against her left arm, which is wildly thrown up into the air. Her right arm is extended upwards, a red lantern hanging from a support in her right hand. The symbolism of the lantern is not certain, though it may just serve as a prop to guide her as she rides.

Pal’s poster is an advertisement for a men’s bicycle model and its image of a partially clothed, voluptuous female figure would immediately grab the attention of a *flâneur*. The woman does not, however, appear to be an allegory; her sexual appeal alone is selling the vehicle. Although the advertisement is oriented towards the male gaze, images of women abandoning themselves to bicycle rides had great appeal to female cyclists, who enjoyed the sensation of liberation that cycling gave them. The model’s state of euphoria, evident in her carefree posture and exuberant expression, sells the idea that cycling provides a feeling of satisfaction through being physically unrestrained. Through using a bicycle, she is disencumbered as she metaphorically soars through the sky without limit, and as she is simply draped in a light, flowing fabric.

Prior to the socially acceptable activity of *flânerie* and the invention of the bicycle, women were not only physically confined by an existence in interior spaces, but were literally restricted by rigid dress codes that upheld the notion of feminine modesty. Conventional attire of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century included corsets, long dresses, overcoats, hats, and gloves extending up the

arm, past the elbow (Herlihy 138). “Exaggerated ornamentation,” such as voluminous skirts, bustles, and bows, was added to women’s clothes as a way to play up femininity, but it contributed to garment weight and became cumbersome (Foley 157). Tight corsetry, which quickly became a symbol of feminine oppression rather than femininity, was used to emphasize the hourglass figure “natural” to the female anatomy (Bouffard 8). Even as long skirts turned into bloomers and the corset was abandoned, an emphasis on the distinctly feminine hourglass figure remained (Foley 158).

Dress reform had been talked about in elite social circles for a generation, with the wearing of baggy “Turkish” pants adopted by only some women of privilege beginning in the 1850s (Herlihy 267). With thousands of women of all classes taking to the bicycle, the issue of women’s costume was pushed like never before, making the decades long goal of more rational dress within reach (Herlihy 267). Sitting square on the seat in order to pedal a bicycle was nearly impossible without struggling with the bulky, long skirts of conventional dress. Tight corsets made it difficult to lean forward and properly breathe while riding; the practice of wearing them largely declined because they were impractical for female cyclists, not because of the achievements of the progressing women’s movement (Bouffard 26).

When faced with the question of wearing bloomers, which had already begun to appear in more athletic environments such as women’s cycling clubs, or shortening their skirts in order to better (and more safely) ride, the average women at first favored donning a knee-length skirt paired with stockings that covered her legs (Herlihy 270). By the mid 1890s, a period of high production of the safety bicycle, however, scores of Parisian women rode their bicycles through



the city, congregating in urban parks, such as the Bois de Bologne, confidently sporting bloomers (Herlihy 269). The bloomer, trouser-like though still retaining a feminine look, became so popular that, by the end of the century, cycling while wearing a skirt was viewed as “passé” (Bouffard 32). Although the adoption of bloomers proved more practical for cycling, it sparked public debate as the garment physically “blurred the distinction” between the sexes (Herlihy 269). The *femme nouvelle* was now impossible to ignore; she controversially exhibited her aspirations on her body in the public sphere (Foley 157).

The increasing population of professional women, or women who aspired to enrich their lives through participation in public activity, asserted a more practical form of dress, both during and outside of their leisure activity of cycling. The *femme nouvelle* had a simplified, shorter hairstyle, reduced overall volume in her clothing through shorter skirts and bloomers made of thinner, breathable fabrics, and had abandoned the great symbol of feminine oppression—the corset (Bouffard 8; Foley 157). Highly visible within a female population that generally continued to wear long dresses, her public presence aroused fears of the “loss of feminine modesty” (Foley 161). The sight of her calves (though covered by stockings), suggested to traditionalists a more “sexual and dangerous” independent woman was emerging (Silverman 67).

The physical appearance of *femmes nouvelles* was subject to endless satire, as virtually all publications of the period commented on the *amazones* or *hommeses*, the “masculine” women who inverted genders as they rode their bicycles (Silverman 63). A common satirical image of the *femme nouvelle* involved a strapping, bloomer-clad woman riding a bicycle away from home, leaving her husband standing at the door, abandoned (Silverman 67). It was the goals of the

*femme nouvelle*, with aspirations of fully integrating into public life, however, that posed the greatest threat to the state's ideal of domestic women who raised children instilled with Republican values (Foley 131). Critics of the *femme nouvelle*, such as conservative statesmen, sought to control the "problem" by attempting to limit or discourage her use of the agent most responsible for her transformation—the bicycle.

As the birth rate was in fact declining, it was feared that women were seeking too much independence from the tradition as they entered educational institutions or the professional field rather than having children (Silverman 67). These feminist actions, perceived as "tampering with the female identity," and thereby inverting sexual roles, were viewed as dangerous to society (Silverman 70). The bicycle had undoubtedly contributed to a woman's sense of liberation, but critics of the *femme nouvelle*, however, viewed that impact of the bicycle with great anxiety and fear. They condemned the bicycle for encouraging "immodest" attire and feared the long-term consequences of the presence of the "third sex" of masculine women, on the Republican family (Herlihy 267). Unsupervised as they rode wherever they pleased, female cyclists were feared to be engaging in "improper liaisons," experiencing sexual pleasure with strange men; such anxieties were "nightmare scenarios" printed as disparaging advertisements in popular publications (Foley 162).

Even more unnerving in the mind's of critics was the "intense pleasure" that could result from cycling, a sensation that some bicycle manufacturer's advertised as a way to catch the attention of women seeking an enjoyable hobby (Foley 161). Images such as Pal's *Fernand Clément & Cie*. [Fig. 4], clearly illustrate the euphoric feeling of cycling, with a sexual

connotation used simply as a marketing tool. Panic was generated from such implications, however, as the act of pedaling was thought to produce pleasurable feelings and increase the instance of nymphomania (Bouffard 10). If a woman was freely experiencing sexual satisfaction without a man, it was felt that the entire foundation of traditional Republic society, based around a woman's sexual purity, her marriage and dedication to childrearing, would become unstable (Foley 162).

Critics also sought to condemn bicycle use through biological and medical evidence, which had been the rationale of Republican arguments about gender roles for decades (Bouffard 11). The attempt was based on the idea that cycling was a risky activity that jeopardized the female biological processes necessary for childbirth; to be barren in a Republic that championed childrearing would be a disgrace (Herlihy 267). Scholars called on doctors to confirm their presumptions of cycling causing decreased fertility rates, complications in pregnancy, hysteria, and spinal problems (Bouffard 11; Foley 160). Though doctors of the period suggested that women should not ride while menstruating or pregnant, and recommended a gynecological exam prior to one's first ride, they could not rationally dissuade women from cycling (Foley 160). The bicycle was an excellent form of overall body exercise, improving the health of an increasingly sedentary urban population; the moral anxieties of an older generation could no longer be justified through the medical community (Foley 160; Herlihy 75).

## Conclusion

“The *Parisienne* of today goes everywhere, does everything,  
and is interested in all. Her life has changed completely.”

--Excerpt from the feminist publication *La Fronde*, 1900 (Foley 163).

In *Cycles Terrot* 1901 [Fig. 5], Plouzeau features the Dijon bicycle manufacturer's new, improved chain system as a small illustration in the poster's bottom right-hand corner. The true focal point, however, is a daring, unsupervised female cyclist riding emerging from a tunnel ahead of a moving train. Silhouetted against the black tunnel, the woman is thoroughly a *femme nouvelle* from head to toe. Wearing bloomers, leggings, mid-calf boots, and a *chemise* with a scarf, she is rationally dressed for comfort in cycling, freed from the corset and long skirts that complicated such activity while still maintaining a feminine figure with a belt cinched at her waist. Her hair is short with a small cap upon her head, reflecting the more practical style embraced by professional women. The woman's head is turned back at the train steaming behind her. The male conductor can be seen leaning out of his car's window, shouting at her as she rides in the path of the train. She responds to his anger with a sassy gesture, *le bisquer*, a teasing flick of the fingers outward from under the chin, asserting herself as she confidently continues to ride ahead of the train. Her right hand holds on to the center of the bicycle's handlebars, guiding her as she pedals onward.

In the thirty years following the debut of the *vélocipède*, French women emerged from the *foyer*, first entering the public sphere through the entirely commercial context of department store. Large, colorful chromolithographic advertisements courted their domestic taste, presenting

them with a fashionable image of themselves, surrounded by material goods and their comforted families. With the mass production of the safety bicycle in the 1890s, which introduced a model tailored to traditional feminine dress, women began to participate in public, social activities more than ever. Their view of themselves, increasingly resembling that of the confident, modern *femmes de Paris* of safety bicycle in advertisements, was one of physical and social liberation. The daring, playful female cyclist racing a train in the 1901 poster *Cycles Terrot* [Fig. 5] is an confirms the arrival of *les femmes nouvelles*, who would continue to drive towards women's liberation into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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Source: KJA Vintage Posters, Maps, and Prints



Figure 2: Jean de Paléologue *Cycles Clément* 1898  
Source: Vintage ArteHouse Online







Figure 4: Jean de Paléologue *Fernand Clément & Cie*. 1894  
Vintage ArteHouse Online





Figure 5: Plouzeau *Cycles Terrot* 1901  
Vintage Poster Market Online